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ABSTRACT

The middle school and junior high school years are extremely important ones in the language, cognitive, and personal development of students. During this time, students should begin using longer sentences with more sophisticated embeddings and showing greater awareness of audience and organization in writing, speaking, listening, and reading. At this age, students should be increasingly more comfortable with transactional modes of writing. The revising stage of the composing process can best be dealt with in a workshop format. Sentence combining should be used as part of the revising assignment, with the complex embeddings drawn from the students' own revisions serving as models. Teachers should insist on meaning, first and form, second; otherwise, students will be discouraged from using more sophisticated constructions. Wide reading of voluntarily selected material and sustained silent reading encourage reading development. Writing and sharing personal responses to literature can help students expand their vicarious social experience, while exposure to many types of literary form, type, and genre expands their linguistic and literary experience. Practice in predicting meaning from context helps students develop reading maturity. In the final analysis, the teacher must provide a language rich environment that emphasizes active, productive language use. (JL)

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Practical Applications of Language Learning Theory in the Middle School and Junior High

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Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the New England Association of Teachers of English (Bedford, NH, October 8-10, 1982)

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Practical Applications of Language Learning Theory in the Middle School and Junior High

Philip M. Anderson

Middle school and junior high school represent a key time in the language development of students. As Lev Vygotsky has suggested, the nature of language development changes in late childhood and early adolescence from "biological to sociohistorical."[1] Put simply, this means the emphasis in language learning shifts toward social learning situations. The shift in language learning parallels the shift to social development in the overall psychological and social development of students at this age. The learner tends to be less egocentric in outlook, and begins to seek experience from outside his/her immediate experience. Junior high and middle school students exhibit symptoms of this shift to social learning in their academic interests and achievements. In the area of language skill and understanding, the syntactic maturity of written sentences catches up with the syntactic maturity of spoken sentences sometime between the 5th and 8th grade.[2] In reading, this is the time of the junior high reading "craze," when students tend to voluntarily read more fiction than at any other time in their lives.[3]

The importance of attending to the language development of students cannot be overestimated. Rita Brause, in a summary of research on language development in junior high and middle school students, presents these three hypotheses about language development:[4]

1) language development affects cognitive development and vice-versa
2) our ability to understand language affects our understanding of the world and vice-versa
3) our ability to understand language affects our ability to use language

Given the importance of the middle school and junior high school time

period in the development of our students, and the paramount importance of language development, a suggestion of classroom practices which should contribute to the development of students' language ability and understanding might be appropriate. These suggested practices will be consonant with accepted notions of language development and are practices aimed especially at the junior high and middle school student.

Though this material is not intended to be a technical explication of the research and theory in language learning, some basic descriptions of development, as manifested in language competence and use, will help to orient the reader. These descriptions should be helpful to the teacher in assessing students' level of ability. Again drawing on Rita Brause, there are four areas of development which can be observed in the language use of students:[5]

1) length of utterance: mature writers and speakers use longer sentences (not including run-ons or excessive coordination). Number 2 explains and qualifies this statement further.

2) depth of embedding: "The elephant runs" is less syntactically mature than "The pink elephant runs," because the second contains two propositions: "The elephant runs," and "The elephant is pink." Notice that although "The pink elephant runs" is more compact than the two propositions embedded in it, it is a longer sentence than the less syntactically mature sentence "The elephant runs" (cf. #1). Adjectival constructions (clauses and phrases) are difficult embeddings for junior high and middle school students.

3) cohesion and organization of ideas: Increasing skillful use of sequencing, cause and effect, and relative clauses (The elephant which runs is pink).

4) functions of language: Increasing demonstration of appropriate uses of expressive (for yourself), transactional (for sending messages), and poetic (for contemplation of experience) modes of discourse.

Put simply, students should be using longer sentences with more sophisticated embeddings, and showing greater awareness of audience and organization in writing, speaking, listening, and reading.

As a general note on teaching practices which enhance students' language development, emphasis should be placed on activity learning. Activities should be designed which allow the student maximum opportunity to read, write, speak, and listen. As Constance Weaver states in her book, Grammar for Teachers, "If you want students to read better have them read; if you want them to write better, have them write."[6]

In the area of composition teaching, students at this age should be increasing more comfortable with transactional (for sending messages) modes of writing. The continued tendency toward expressive writing (which precedes transactional discourse developmentally) should not be discouraged, but it will mitigate some students' abilities to fully understand the nature of transactional discourse. Students should do both expressive and transactional forms of composition, and should aim their transactional writing at many different audiences. Developing a sense of audience, and appropriate writing for that audience, is an important step in the development of writing competence. Students should also be attending to organization in their writing, especially sequencing of various types and cause and effect relationships. The revising stage of the composing process is especially important for students at this age for the purpose of attending to matters of organization. This is especially true if the revising process takes place in a workshop format, and students are able to talk about one another's writing; the spoken dialogue usually results

in students having a better understanding of the effect of their writing on an audience.

At the sentence level, students' sophistication of organization and level of syntactic maturity can be enhanced through the use of sentence combining techniques. The suggestion here is not to use sentence combining as an isolated exercise (though some sentence combining practice might be useful, even in isolation from composing), but as part of the revising assignment for composition assignments. Sentence combining can be used to constructively help students improve poor sentences, rather than writing "AWK" or "FRAG" in the margin. The circling of two or more sentences with the instruction to combine them can be helpful for student revision. Also of value is the demonstration of more complex embeddings drawn from students' essays, especially if the student has written a more sophisticated sentence as a result of revision. The teacher can also demonstrate, through sentence combining techniques, increasingly sophisticated constructions for her/his students.

A final note about the development of written language skills and understanding is that students' sophistication grows through attending to meaning first, and form second. In other words, students will use the relative clause first, and learn how to punctuate it later. Insistence by the teacher that students punctuate everything correctly under all circumstances will end up discouraging student use of more sophisticated constructions. The time to teach the proper punctuation of many grammatical constructions is after the construction is securely in the students' writing. The implication here, of course, is more attention to individual development as evidenced in students' writing, and less attention to whole-class grammar and mechanics lessons.

Working with students on an individual basis need not be an overwhelming task, if one remembers that students usually can attend to only one or two writing problems at a time anyway. The teacher is not solving everyone's problems all at once, and not working with each student's total development as a writer, but attending to problems when needed and allowing the students to develop as writers through writing.

Reading development and sophistication of response to literature at this age level are dependent on the students' need for increased vicarious experience and increased language experience. An emphasis on wide reading of voluntarily selected material is appropriate for students at this age, and not just outside of the classroom. Sustained silent reading is a very good use of class time for reading development in students at this level. Also, students at this age (and probably at all ages) read at a much higher level of ability when they are reading something they are interested in. Wide reading of voluntarily selected materials can only enhance the students' reading abilities.

Developing sophistication in response to literature involves increasing ability to predict outcomes, infer character (especially when stereotypes are involved), and understand literary form. By literary form it is meant that students understand the differences between various literary types and genre; it does not mean literary structure. Students at this age seem cognitively incapable of making structural generalizations about literature, but they can distinguish types of literature and form of presentation. All of the above activities rely on increasing awareness of others, on social convention, on the part of students. Students must step outside themselves, put themselves in someone else's position, predict what might happen rather than what they want to happen in a story, and understand appropriate audience response to various forms of literature. Students are not expected to submerge their personal

response to literature (in fact they are encouraged to develop personal response in their wide reading), but are increasing made aware of the commonality of response to literature through comparison of their personal responses. The writing of personal response to literature, and the sharing of that personal response, are important components in the language experience and development of junior high and middle school students. While students use literature to expand their vicarious social experience, teachers can assist and direct the expansion of the students' linguistic and literary experience through assigning and suggesting and reading many varieties of literary form, language, type, and genre. Intensive study of a small number of literary works would definitely not be to the advantage of the students at this point of development. Formal literary essays do not help the students with their writing or their literary response sophistication at this level of development.

The ability to read for meaning involves understanding words in context. Emphasis on predicting the meaning of unfamiliar words from context is an important step in the development of reading maturity. Vocabulary study in the middle school and junior high school should not be done in isolation from reading, and that includes looking up vocabulary words in the glossary before reading the selection. Selections from the story containing the vocabulary words should be read and the class can practice predicting meaning from context. Both semantic and syntactic context clues can be examined in this way. The traditional study of prefixes and suffixes, syllabication, and grammar take on a new purpose in this context; students are not studying these topics as things in themselves, but as ways of getting meaning from a text.

In the final analysis, the teacher's role is to provide a language rich environment for the middle school and junior high school student. Emphasis should be placed on active, productive language use, rather than analytical exercises. In-class publication of student work, whether it be in the nature of a "broadside" tacked on the bulletin board, a class literary magazine, or a "collected works" of each student set between construction paper covers, is an important part of making writing "real" to students. At the top of the scale, students might produce their own illustrated books, either individually or in teams and give them to the elementary school library.

The importance of dialogue in the development of language and thought suggests the value of drama in the middle school and junior high school curriculum. The junior high school student's well-known love of doing plays (at least reading plays in class) seems to be further evidence of both the change in the nature of language development at this age, and the significance of dialogue in that development.

It seems that more time is spent in the middle school and junior high school trying to get the students to shut up than there is trying to channel that verbal onslaught into something productive. For the sake of "teaching" much student language learning is ignored, or at the worst stifled. The suggestion here is not to give up on teaching language, because not all language learning is "natural," but to adjust our teaching to allow these natural tendencies to work to the advantage of the students and ourselves as teachers of the English language.

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Footnotes:

1. Lev Semenovich Vygotsky, Thought and Language, trans. Eugenia Hanfmann and Gertrude Vakar (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1962), p. 51.
2. Constance Weaver, Grammar for Teachers: Perspectives and Definitions (Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1979), p. 15.
3. Alan C. Purves and Richard Beach, Literature and the Reader: Research in Response to Literature, Reading Interests, and the Teaching of Literature (Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1972), p. 72.
4. Rita S. Brause, "Language Development: Research and Implications for Middle School and Junior High School Teachers," English Journal (November 1979) 68:8 p. 64.
5. Brause, p. 64.
6. Weaver, p. 5.

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Loban, Walter. Language Development: Kindergarten through Grade Twelve. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1976.

Moffett, James. Teaching the Universe of Discourse. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968.

Weaver, Constance. Grammar for Teachers: Perspectives and Definitions. Urbana,IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1979.

All of the above books and articles discuss language development in a K-12 framework; all contain practical teaching tips on reading and writing activities that promote language learning. Britton's Language and Learning is a "classic," and is somewhat theoretical. Moffett's Teaching the Universe of Discourse presents a composition curriculum based on language development theories. The Language Learning theme issue of Educational Leadership contains many short articles on reading, writing, and language activities related to language development. Constance Weaver's Grammar for Teachers discusses grammar and language teaching, and reading and writing from the viewpoint of language development. It is the single best resource on the list and is a book no English/Language Arts teacher should be without.

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